

BOOK REVIEW

# What Are Animals Worth?

Jishnu Guha-Majumdar



*Review of:*

Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel,  
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Jishnu Guha-Majumdar is  
an Assistant Professor of  
Political Theory at Butler  
University, Indianapolis, IN.

Email: [jguhamajumdar@butler.edu](mailto:jguhamajumdar@butler.edu)

**E**arly on in *Animals and Capital*, Dinesh Wadiwel aptly notes that the text may be considered a sequel to *The War Against Animals* (2015). In that text, Wadiwel had deconstructed human-centred theorizations of war, sovereignty, and biopolitics. He demonstrated that one could not just “add and stir” animals into these categories, but that a consideration of non-human animal lives and deaths deepens and transforms our understanding of those concepts. What *The War Against Animals* does for politics, *Animals and Capital* does for political economy. Wadiwel’s main task here is to illuminate the unique structural position that food animals occupy within capitalism. Doing so, he argues, has important ramifications for developing solidarity between food animals and marginalized humans that will strengthen both animal advocacy and anti-capitalist praxis.

*Animals and Capital* joins a growing literature that theorizes the relationship between capitalism and what Wadiwel calls hierarchal anthropocentrism. But *Animals and Capital* is unique in its pursuit of a comprehensive and systematic critique of (anthropocentric) political economy, as well as its theorization of food animals’ role in the production of capitalist value. By “systematic critique of political economy”, I mean that Wadiwel’s primary purpose is not to do political economy per se — though he does to a substantive degree — but to transform anthropocentric understandings of the categories of political economic analysis. By focusing on “capitalist value”, I refer to how Wadiwel interrogates the way capitalism uses nonhuman animals to meet its primary drive: the production of surplus value. Food animals illuminate how the value-production under capitalism proceeds in new and crucial ways that Marx and anthropocentric Marxists have not adequately theorized. As he puts it in Chapter 1, “[t]he question that has been missing is about value. Exactly how are animals valuable to capitalism? Why have they been sought after as objects of use value? And how does this value dictate and shape their relation to capital” (28)?

Another way of thinking about Wadiwel’s approach is through a phrase that kept recurring to me as I read: *Animals and Capital* is

something like a preliminary *Das Kapital* for food animal production. Wadiwel takes up the critical tools bequeathed by Marx's later work in order to take the spirit of *Capital* beyond itself. The result is a work that is extremely clarifying for understanding the path that anthropocentric domination has taken over the last century, and more importantly, opens up worthwhile further questions and avenues for analysis.

In this review I want to explore *Animals and Capital* by dividing it into three parts: first, the Preface and first two chapters, which set up the basic methodological presuppositions for the rest of the text; then the middle chapters, in which Wadiwel performs his critique of political economy with respect to the titular concepts. These are the heart of the text, in my view. Finally, I will focus on the shorter last chapter, where Wadiwel speculates on the political trajectory that his analysis may lead animal advocates towards. I will summarize each part and then critically engage with Wadiwel's insights, focusing especially on his reconceptualization of labour and resistance and the political implications of his analysis.

## Methodology and Key Concepts

The Preface frames Wadiwel's three intended interventions. First, that the problem animal advocates must address is not "speciesism" — an arbitrary prejudice — but the material and ideological conjunction of "hierarchical anthropocentrism" and capitalism (vii). Second, advocates ought to focus as much attention on production as they do on consumption. Not only do factory farms manufacture food animals at a scale never seen before in human history, but they also "produce" humanity biopolitically by literally providing sustenance for a growing mass of human labour. The book's third intervention is to go beyond "commodification" and property status as the main frame for understanding anthropocentric domination. While important, this frame does not capture what is central to food animal oppression insofar as capitalism constantly commodifies various forms of life and sentience, human and nonhuman. More essential is their unique structural position as food animals, captured not only by the physical implements of captivity but the dragnet of capitalist valorization.

In Chapter 1, “Value”, Wadiwel defines his understanding of capitalism, articulates the main value-forms food animals take on for capital, and situates *Animals and Capital* among other literature on Marx and nonhuman beings. Wadiwel defines capitalism as “an organism and mechanism that seeks to extract value and accumulate it in the form of capital: the latter comprising a social relation which is invested in its own continual accumulation” (8–9). This definition emphasizes that domination proceeds less from one group — capitalists in and of themselves — than an impersonal, inhuman *system* that ceaselessly seeks to reorganize every form of life it contacts for the purposes of value creation.

Under capital, food animals appear in three value-forms. First, as consumption commodities — food — that enable the reproduction of human labour forces. Second, as raw materials to be worked upon by the agricultural production process. Finally — and perhaps most importantly for Wadiwel — as labour. Nonhuman animals are active agents in the production process (a claim elaborated upon in Chapter 4, “Labour”). Indeed, they are perhaps the most “*significant labour force of capitalism*” (14, original emphasis) given the sheer numbers of animals produced in factory farms. Wadiwel argues that this third prong distinguishes his account from many contemporary approaches to theorizing capitalism and nonhumans — namely John Bellamy Foster’s defence of Marx, Jason Moore’s ecological reformulation of capitalism, and Ariel Salleh’s ecofeminist account of capitalism. Despite their resonances with his approach, he suggests they still tend to conceptualize nonhuman animals as resources for, rather than agents of, production.

Chapter 2, “Materialism”, works through three methodological inspirations (besides Marx): new materialisms, Afropessimism, and Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of capitalism. Wadiwel appreciates how new materialist theories emphasize materiality beyond the borders of human sovereignty, but worries that its emphasis on a politics of affinity and pluralism is insufficient to theorize the food animals’ antagonistic relationship to capitalism. He thus draws on Frank Wilderson’s work to theorize this antagonism. The rest of

Wadiwel's work consistently weaves between these two tendencies, sometimes theorizing nonhuman animals as having important commonalities and opportunities for solidarity with other social justice movements, and other times worrying that certain articulations of human emancipation entail intensifying animal domination. Wadiwel then uses Deleuze and Guattari to put a finer point on the relationship between hierarchical anthropocentrism and capital. Capital works by "liberating" and intensifying certain flows and desires, which enables it to take on pre-existing relationships of domination and fundamentally transform them in an "intoxicated and frenzied way" (56).

### **The Critique of Anthropocentric Political Economy**

In the middle section of the book, Wadiwel practices the critique of anthropocentric political economy that his prior chapters theorize. Chapter 3, "Commodity", takes up the first two of the aforementioned value-forms imposed on food animals: consumptive commodities and raw materials for production. Through a rather complicated and brilliant reading of a footnote in *Capital*, as well as key texts by Luce Irigaray, Wilderson, and Jacques Derrida, Wadiwel shows that the food animal functions both as a material and symbolic commodity. In the traditional process of commodification, the commodity's use value becomes abstracted from its exchange value, which is determined in relation to an economy of other exchange-values. But in the case of the food animal commodity, this system of value exceeds the rigidly economic sphere as it also confirms human superiority in a discursive economy of meaning. As Wadiwel puts it, "the exponential and frenzied circulation of animal-sourced foods for human satisfaction and pleasure establishes a continuing mirror that allows humans to see themselves — sovereign, victorious — in the corpses which are fabricated" (71).

Whereas this aspect of commodification concerns nonhuman animals' role in production, Wadiwel also considers the consumptive side of animal commodification. Here, capitalism poses a unique problem for animal advocates, because it gives human labourers the false promise of freedom through spending their wages on consumer

goods, and especially animal products. Late capitalism's regime of cheap food metabolically intertwines human populations with non-human animal death. This creates problems for consumption-focused ethical veganism (though Wadiwel does support certain forms of political veganism), because animal products "are saturated by the promise of freedom and its necessity, so that it would seem that giving up animal-sourced products becomes akin to a loss of world or death itself" (85). Animal advocates, then, must contend with food animals' dual role as elements of production and consumption.

Chapter 4, "Labour", might be the most central of these middle chapters, robustly developing the concept of food animals' "metabolic labour". Drawing upon anthropologist Les Beldo and feminist theorizations of gestational labour, Wadiwel posits that capital targets animals' microbiological processes for ceaseless growth and value production. Food animals are a unique type of labourer because they are both constant capital (that which transfers but does not add new value to the product, like machinery or raw material) and variable capital (that which adds new value to the commodity). Wadiwel doesn't quite use these words, but food animal labour appears as the endpoint of capital's dream of totally unhindered labour exploitation — capital optimizes every part of the food animal's body and life to enhance its microbiological processes. A second key intervention concerns the way Marxists have conceptualized capital. Understanding animals as labourers complicates the inverse relationship that Marx posits between human labour time and fixed capital as technology advances. Instead, with factory farming's technical advances, human labour consistently fades away, while nonhuman animal labour increases and faces an increasing mass of fixed capital.

Chapter 5, "Circulation", describes the maritime transport of live animals to be slaughtered in increasingly globalized markets, highlighting an important but underexamined aspect of the industry. It is the most empirical chapter, and I found some of the "smaller" details about global animal markets to be quietly devastating: for example, that 5–10 percent of animals get pink eye from the dust produced by cheap animal feed (146), and that cows stand for the entire duration

of globe-spanning voyages because they do not feel comfortable sitting down (159). At a conceptual level, Wadiwel shows that considering nonhuman animals as active agents in the production process explains why markets have tended to rely on animals imported from other parts of the world: food animals continue to labour on themselves, making their relative labour cost rather low. This insight provides an exception to Marx's general "law" that circulation disrupts the time of production; because the site of animal labour is within their own bodies, production continues even during circulation.

Chapter 6, "Resistance", uses fish production to examine a theme latent but unexplored in prior chapters: the role of food animal resistance in their own production as animal capital. Wadiwel argues that the question "Do fish resist?" offers political potential blocked by traditional questions of sentience and suffering. Resistance, he suggests, depends less on proving intrinsic animal capabilities, which are already epistemically shaped by the violent systems conditioning animal behaviour. Taking a page from the "operaist" tendency in Italian Marxism, he argues that capitalist technologies of production betray a belief in fish resistance. What else are the hook, the purse seine net, and aquaculture farms but efforts to master the resistance of fish? Though a seeming total domination of food animals, this state of affairs reveals the way that nonhuman agency structures our world, and holds out faith that this resistance is prior to and exceeds the systems of domination that seek to capture it.

## **Labour and Resistance**

One more chapter of the text remains, but I pause here to reflect on the important insights of this middle part of the text. Among the many brilliant arguments from these chapters, Wadiwel's development of "metabolic labour" seems most central. I welcome consideration of this concept as a point of discussion for further analysis of anthropocentric capitalism, but it also raises a number of questions. What is "labour" such that it covers the typical image of human labour, the "macrobiological" labour of nonhuman animals (things animals do that interact with the external world), and, finally, internal, "microbiological" metabolic processes that contribute to animal

growth? What is necessary to classify something as labour, and what are the stakes of that decision?

Wadiwel does partly answer each of these issues, but these answers raise further questions. Regarding what makes something labour, Wadiwel suggests this is the wrong question. Instead of asking “Do animals labour?” he says that a better question “is something like: ‘What is the use value of animal labour *power to capital?*’” (98, emphasis added). I do think the latter question is helpful, but it still seems that determining the use value of labour power depends on some prior discussion of what makes something labour. Concerning the second issue—the stakes of calling something labour—Wadiwel makes clear in an earlier chapter that doing so emphasizes non-human animals as active, rather than passive, agents in production. While I am obviously sympathetic to this standpoint, it isn’t clear to me that emphasizing animals’ metabolic processes accomplishes this goal. That is, if food animals’ active, labouring contribution is the fact that their bodies try to survive and grow, that seems a far cry from the sorts of worldmaking agency that this agentic move usually celebrates. Here, an application of the new materialist insights from Chapter 2 might have proved helpful. However, this invocation would pose problems for the text’s goal to theorize the unique structural position of food animals; one might just as well point to the metabolic processes of plants as indications that they, too, are combinations of constant and variable capital.

A related issue emerges with Wadiwel’s discussion of resistance. I do think a focus on animal resistance is crucial, and I welcome Wadiwel’s application of operaism. However, I don’t think that resistance fully avoids the difficulties of other capacities like suffering. Wadiwel says that one of the advantages of the notion of resistance is that it avoids debates over whether nonhuman animals have this or that capacity or neurobiological substrate. But as he notes later on, it is just as possible to write off fish resistance as mere instinctive reaction. In this case, too, we are returned to debates about sentience and capacity, because these decide whether the resistance shown is actually resistance.



What unites these considerations is the slipperiness of questions about nonhuman animal agency. One value that suffering has—though not necessarily in its welfarist or utilitarian iteration—is that it focuses on a vulnerability that, as Jacques Derrida puts it in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (2008), is a form of impower rather than the types of power and capacity that, as Wadiwel rightly notes, get mired in epistemologies shaped by violence. To be clear, the purpose of these questions is not to suggest that the concept of metabolic labour or focusing on resistance is unhelpful, or that suffering is a panacea. To the contrary, there is interesting potential in the concept, but as presented I think there is room for further discussion and conceptual development.

## Politics

In the shorter last chapter, “Dreams”, Wadiwel turns to the political implications of his analysis. He does not aim to be too programmatic here, allowing space for readers to adapt his analysis for politics on the ground. He splits his interventions into three categories: framing, tactics, and goals. At the level of framing, Wadiwel suggests that the key demand of pro-animal activists ought not be a mere reduction in food animal suffering, but for animals to have their lives back. Additionally, he repeats his call for animal advocates to focus on production and not solely consumption. At the level of tactics, Wadiwel argues that veganism does have an important political role, but many forms of consumerist, market-driven veganism are unlikely to alter capitalism’s structure of production. Finally, at the level of goals, Wadiwel considers how traditional communist figurations of a democratic ownership of the means of production may risk intensifying domination of nonhuman animals. Instead, human and nonhuman solidarity might be sought through the lens of reclaiming time, which would lead advocates to calling to an end to work altogether, thus following the path of anti-capitalists like Antonio Negri and Kathi Weeks.

I found myself mostly in agreement with what Wadiwel says, but his emphasis on pursuing production-oriented strategies raised a number of questions. Wadiwel does not deny the value of many

demand-side interventions, noting that production and consumption are intertwined, but he does not fully explain the character of this intertwinement at the level of political advocacy. I think the work would have benefitted from articulating the relationship between the production and consumption with more depth, as strategies concerning consumption will always be a part of the animal advocate's repertoire. For all the limitations of consumption-oriented movements, they do appeal to a sphere where people have direct control (a point which Wadiwel does recognize).

More generally, although Wadiwel does spend time outlining examples of production-focused advocacy, I still came away not fully certain of what this type of advocacy looks like in an everyday way. He does give two illuminating, current examples: one from the Yuin nation's resistance to Kangaroo culling in Australia, and another from the Mexican anti-speciesist organization FaunAcción, both of which take seriously the conjunction of colonialism and capitalism. However, the text presents these examples mostly through their declarations of intent. These are no doubt important, but it would seem that a shift to jamming production makes especially pertinent the process by which declaration is collectively transformed into effective on-the-ground organizing.

Another question raised by this chapter is the extent to which Wadiwel's analysis supports two very prevalent — at least in the US — pro-animal strategies: rescue operations, like those from Direct Action Everywhere, that break into factory farms and expose the conditions of production; and “lab-grown” meat. The latter, I suspect, would be more controversial, given the corporations and level of capital involved. Pro-market lab-grown meat advocates endorse this strategy for the supply-side reasons as well, but they explicitly endorse the power of the market and large corporations to make this technology a commonplace reality.<sup>1</sup> On the other side some anti-capitalists are more optimistic about lab-grown meat, arguing that it is an urgent priority for the left to socialize its

<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Popper, “This Animal Activist Used to Get in Your Face. Now He’s Going After Your Palate”, *New York Times* 12 March 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/technology/bruce-friedrich-animal-activist.html>

production.<sup>2</sup> If Wadiwel is correct and the productive sphere is key, then this latter approach seems most consonant with his analysis, but he leaves this question open.

I don't think Wadiwel is obliged to provide definite answers to all these questions within the scope of his already wide-ranging work, and it is a mark of its strength that *Animals and Capital* pushes these conversations forward. It helpfully enables animal advocates to better map out modern structures of animal domination and provides them with important conceptual toolkits for navigating them. As such, I highly recommend this text and consider it essential reading both for animal advocates and for any critic of capitalism. Both *Animals and Capital* and *The War Against Animals* magisterially diagnose the distinct character of the modern anthropocentric domination of nonhuman animals. Together, they make a strong case that all those interested in social justice struggles ought to be interested in the struggle for animal liberation as well (and vice versa).

2 Jan Dutkiewicz, "Socialize Lab Meat", *Jacobin* 11 August 2019. <https://jacobin.com/2019/08/lab-meat-socialism-green-new-deal>